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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN RUSSIA

Classified By: DCM Daniel Russell: Reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. According to religious freedom advocates, human rights experts, and religious leaders, overall religious freedom in Russia continues to improve, despite continued individual violations documented in our annual Report on Religious Freedom. More than 22,000 religious organizations have registered, no religion meeting statutory requirements has been denied national registration status, and the number of people participating in organized religions is increasing. The constitution, federal law, and federal government officials support freedom of religion, although religious groups (particularly Muslims) can face pressure from local government officials. Experts agree that administrative actions against religious groups are more often driven by corruption than by bigotry. Religious groups must cope with bureaucracy and paperwork through a process that, as one expert put it, "ensures equal red tape for everyone," but tends to present greater challenges for smaller and less well-connected religious groups. End summary.

Russia: A Nation of Believers

¶2. (U) Religious freedom experts and religious leaders agree that the growth in religious freedom in Russia has maintained a positive trajectory since 1991, when the USSR disintegrated, which is reflected in polling data. According to a VTsIOM poll conducted at the end of 2006, 84% of Russians believe in God, 63% identify themselves as Russian Orthodox, and 6% as Muslim. Other Christian groups make up approximately 3% of the population. The growth of those who identify themselves as a member of an organized religion is striking. For example, the number of Russians identifying themselves as Russian Orthodox has grown from 34% (1990) to 50% (1999) to 63% (2006), according to VTsIOM. Other polls have found that Orthodox are approximately 70% of the population, and Muslims as much as 16%.

¶3. (U) While only 10-12% of Russians regularly attend services (similar to European countries), this is double the 1991 level, and the average age of members has fallen from 60 to 48.

Russia's Religious Groups Multiply

¶4. (U) The spread of religious identification is reflected in the growth in registered religious organizations. According to the 1997 Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Association," religious communities must register as a juridical entity to receive certain rights and privileges, such as owning property or entering into contracts. As of December 2005 (the latest statistics available), the MOJ had registered 22,513 groups, 54% of which were Russian Orthodox Church

(ROC) organizations. Russia's largest religions and their percentage of the population are listed below.

Religion	Groups	Pct of Groups	Pct of Pop (est.)
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ROC	12,214	54%	63-70%
Muslim	3,668	16%	6-16%
Protestant	4,000	18%	1-2%
Jewish	284		